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Grackles in Montgomery

S. Ray Granade

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Grackles in Montgomery
by S. Ray Granade
5/19/2020

His youth unfolded in extremely rural western Alabama beginning about a decade before the Great Depression. He lived in the bosom of extended family, with everyone who lived within five miles in any direction being kin (as he liked to say). In his immediate family, three older brothers and a sister (and eventually a younger brother) competed with each other and with Sam in a rough-and-tumble environment. The boys seemed constantly tussling—to the point that a favorite family story has a female visitor exclaim to their mother “Julia, come quick! These boys are killing each other!”

The family’s life proved equally rough-and-tumble. About the time that the Great Depression struck, Jack Granade moved his family from Frankville to Leroy for its educational opportunities, but his sons, like their father, turned their hands to whatever would support the family. They farmed, timbered, and even helped put US Highway 43 (AL 13) through the community with a mule and a slip scraper. At school, Sam proved adept enough at the game to earn a football scholarship from Auburn. As each son graduated high school, “Mr. Jack” provided forty acres, use of a mule and equipment, and seed for a growing season. Whatever that son could earn from the land that year provided the family’s investment in his education.

Just as the land provided income, so it provided entertainment. All the sons became devotees of field and stream sports, each in its season. One of Sam’s first successful trades garnered him a well-used, loose-actioned, rabbit-eared, double-barrelled, 16-gauge shotgun and his first outright purchase a 20-gauge Marlin pump-action built the year of his birth. He learned to hunt squirrel, dove, and especially turkey—though occasionally he and his brothers teamed up to hunt deer. Generally he fished moving water—the Tombigbee just to his east and its tributaries that drained all the nearby land—mostly for bass with a casting rod-and-reel, though often for anything that would bite—particularly bream under mayflies.

Sam spent about twenty-five years as pastor in Evergreen, a small south-Alabama county-seat town with access to all the hunting and fishing he could find time to enjoy. He bought land for its timber production possibilities, planting pines in what had once been fields but maintaining a mixed forest environment productive of wildlife habitat in the forested places. Eventually he had three decent parcels of land in various parts of the county, two bordering moving water. He bought a motor, then built a plywood boat on which to use it. He acquired a Shakespeare reel on which

he wound good braided line and settled on Snagless Sally weedless lures. And he graduated to a Winchester 12-gauge autoloader with which to hunt, using a longer-barrel modified choke for turkey or squirrels and shorter-barrel improved cylinder for dove.

About the time he moved from Evergreen to Montgomery, Sam's son's father-in-law built him a gun cabinet out of walnut sawn from a tree that had formerly graced the pastorium's grounds. Into it went his shotgun, its extra barrel, and a pellet gun. The latter he acquired to battle squirrels for possession of the figs from trees he transplanted from "the home place" in Leroy. Its quietness did not offend the sensibilities of his neighbors around 3510 Bankhead Avenue, near Huntington College.

Sam became a city boy grudgingly, though with good grace, spending his last three decades in that environment. He spent time keeping his yard neat and, as he got to know his neighbors the way any good pastor does, they came to share not just information, but also common complaints about Black Belt land and city creatures, like squirrels but particularly grackles. Alone, the birds were not bad. But Montgomery grackles proliferated and flocked, and where one arrived so did a yardful. A hundred or so would noisily descend, covering the ground and seeking out whatever they might devour, then gregariously flying away—leaving behind solid evidence of their previous presence.

A next-door neighbor, a local judge by vocation, wondered aloud in the midst of one of these discussions whether or not Sam might have a solution to the problem. "After all," he said, "you did grow up in Washington County, learned how to hunt, kept up the practice, and still have your shotgun." Heart bypass surgery a decade after his retirement had caused Sam to give up hunting and fishing, though he had retained the tools of his previous pleasures. He paused, so he later related, and parted with the judge promising to give the matter some thought.

The next day, when the grackles descended, Sam loaded his shotgun, walked out into his backyard, and let fly. The grackles vacated his yard for the rest of the day. That evening, the judge wandered over, rang the doorbell, and asked if Sam would be willing to perform that service for him. In his slow, measured speech pattern, Sam softly drawled out his assent to helping a neighbor in need. Shortly thereafter, his next-door neighbor from the other side rang the same doorbell. The conversation started a bit differently. "You know it's unlawful to discharge a firearm in the city limits," he began. Sam admitted that yes, he did know that. "Well, if you don't care I certainly don't" the neighbor said before making the same request and getting the same answer.

The next day, Sam loaded his shotgun, stuffed a few extra shells in his pocket, and walked out his door. As if on command, the grackles descended on the judge's yard. Sam followed them next door and performed his

neighborly duty. Then he ambled southward down Bankhead to the other neighbor's house to redeem that promise if necessary, shotgun held loosely in the crook of his right arm as if the street were nothing but a deserted woods road.

But as he made his way down the street, a patrol car eased up beside him and one of the two officers in the car rolled down his window as vehicle and walker both stopped. Conversationally, the policeman asked if the shotgun were loaded. The retired pastor slowly allowed as how it was. The policeman asked Sam where home was, and the grackle-wrangler gestured with his left hand at the cardinal-featured sign for 3510 that marked the mailbox and the house just down the driveway. The two lamented together about the grackle nuisance before a brief companionable silence stilled the words. Then the young policeman delicately mentioned to the old man that walking city streets with a loaded shotgun probably wasn't in his best interests. If someone called in a complaint, city police would have to take it seriously. They'd dispatch a car and if the officers involved found the person, they'd either have to cite or jail him. The officer suggested that the shotgunner go on home, and promised that if he did, they'd forget what they'd seen. He did and they presumably did. Thus ended what his son came to call "The Great Grackle Shoot."